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Panel hears about increasing chemical pollutants in Lake Mead

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More than 10 million people a year boat, swim, fish and ski on the same Lake Mead water that ultimately gushes from faucets in area homes and businesses.

Such competing interests are putting great pressure on the man-made lake southeast of Las Vegas, which is created from Colorado River water backed up by Hoover Dam.

A presidential commission, meeting Wednesday at the Lake Mead Resort, heard testimony that chemicals such as perchlorate -- a rocket-fuel booster produced in Henderson -- toxic organisms such as cryptosporidium, and the lake's intense recreational uses are endangering Las Vegas' single source of drinking water.

The dangers have intensified with development at the water's edge that contribute sewage and garbage to the lake's problems, the testimony indicated. The testimony came mostly from officials with the federal government whose agencies are involved with public water supplies.

Forming guidelines for balancing increasingly diverse uses of public drinking-water supplies is the commission's task.

The eight members of the National Recreation Lakes Study Commission will today conclude their two-day local meeting. They are scheduled to make their report next year.

Susan Savage, a commission member who is also mayor of Tulsa, Okla., said a major threat to public drinking water nationally is the runoff from poultry and hog farms.

For Indian tribes in Washington state, the United States needs to forge international efforts to clean the waters, said Richard Swan of the Colville Confederated Tribes, which represents 12 Pacific Northwest Indian bands.

Canada's waste water containing 250,000 tons per day of dioxins and other toxins enters the Columbia River and has contaminated Lake Roosevelt, Swan said. "It's an international problem we hope the commission addresses," he said.

No matter whether representatives from the Defense Department or the National Park Service were speaking, the message to the commission was clear: Clean water is essential.

"Don't do away with the goose that lays the golden egg," warned Darrell Lewis of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, referring to waters plagued with urban runoff, treated sewage and erosion.

Each agency involved in irrigation, recreation or supplying drinking water has its own unique situation and needs, said Alan O'Neill, superintendent of the Lake Mead National Recreation Area.

"Be careful of any cookie-cutter approach, for each agency has its own unique problems and opportunities," O'Neill said.